

CHAPTER 7: SLAVERY

INTRODUCTION

Rome was a slave-owning society. Although the Romans are often portrayed as kind and benevolent in their treatment of slaves, the Roman system of slavery was brutally oppressive and its victims were often subjected to inhuman conditions. But slavery in the Roman world was not racially motivated and it did offer possibilities for emancipation. In those respects, it was fundamentally different from the slavery that existed in America and in the British colonies.

Romans considered neither the concept nor the practice of slavery evil or unusual. They recognized that slavery was contrary to the laws of nature, but accepted it as a law of man. Military victors made slaves of the people they conquered and, as Rome conquered more and more people, slaves began to flood domestic markets. Piracy and kidnapping also increased the supply of slaves.

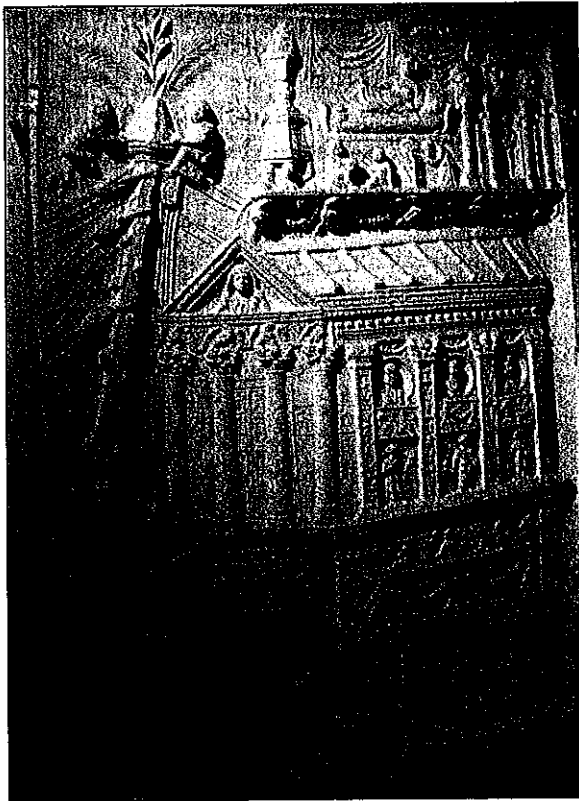


Fig. 27.
Slaves are at work constructing a building by using a crane on a large wheel.

Slaves were the work force that made many of Rome's greatest achievements possible. Although the Romans seldom acknowledged the importance of their slaves and often lived in fear of slave uprisings, ancient Rome would not have become the mightiest power in the Mediterranean world without slaves.

There is much that remains unknown about slavery in the ancient world. We can only guess at the size of the slave population. We cannot be sure how readily a slave could be distinguished from a free person at sight. Moreover, no literature written by slaves about their experiences survives.

SOURCES AND MARKETS

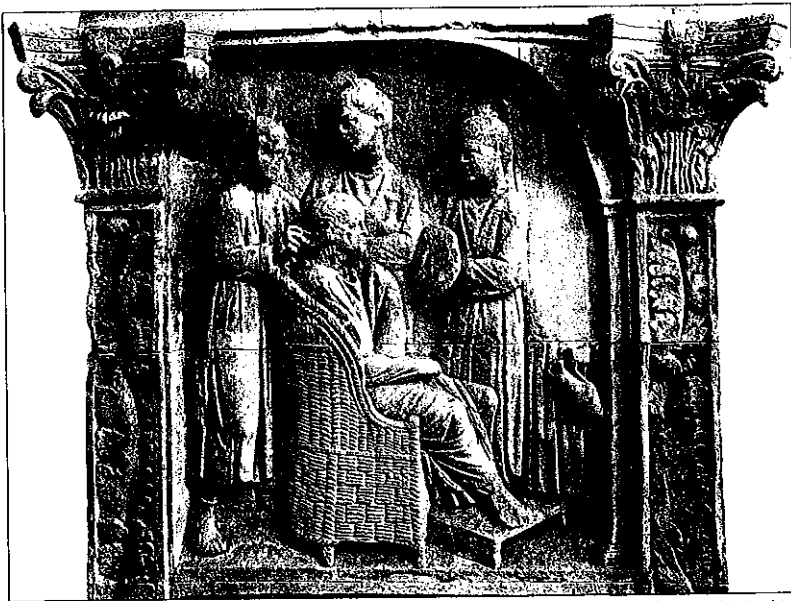
Slaves came from many sources. Most were purchased from dealers who acquired their stock from the sale of captives defeated in war or from slave hunters and pirates on the fringes of Roman territories. Slaveholders, who oftentimes had inherited slaves, sold them to raise money. Occasionally slaves were born and bred at home, but this occurred rarely since it was expensive to raise young children until they were old enough to be productive.

Slave dealers held public sales or auctions in slave markets. Typically, slaves were forced to stand on a block, naked, wearing only a metal plaque around their neck listing their age, nationality, and any notable talents or defects. Skilled slaves, such as doctors, teachers, hairdressers, or cooks, not surprisingly, brought higher prices. If a slave's feet had been whitened with chalk, this indicated that the slave was being sold for the first time or had just arrived from outside of Italy.

TYPES OF SLAVES

The majority of slaves worked in agriculture and industry. The nature of their work varied enormously. In farming, for example, one slave might perform the lowest type of drudgery, actually pulling a plow through a field, while another was privileged to serve as overseer with power over all the farm slaves. In industry, at one end of the spectrum were slaves who performed the dangerous work of a miner or a quarryman while others produced finely fashioned sculptures or frescoes.

Slaves also served on the staffs of political, religious, and military leaders, as personal attendants, curriers, and secretaries. The navy depended on slaves as oarsmen. Forced to endure difficult and dangerous conditions, galley slaves who rowed below decks were crucial to the success of the Roman navy. Public slaves were the property of the government and kept the city in good working order. They cleaned and repaired the streets, sewers, buildings, bridges, and aqueducts.



American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive

Fig. 28.
Three household slaves groom their mistress and arrange her hair.

Household slaves were usually the most fortunate. Of course they performed many lowly and disagreeable tasks, but some positions entailed considerable responsibility and commanded respect. Traditionally, household slaves served as nursemaids, tutors and bodyguards to school-age children, doormen, dressers, cooks, and secretaries. Larger households required several types of secretaries, for example, those in charge of correspondence, finances, and record keeping.

While many slaves, constantly in fear of brutal punishment, led a wretched life of relentless toil, others, usually the trained and educated, attained privileged

positions and were well-treated members of their household. Indeed, some of the luckier slaves probably ate and dressed better than many of the poor residents of the same neighborhood. Despite this, the devastating effect of the loss of personal freedom cannot be underestimated.

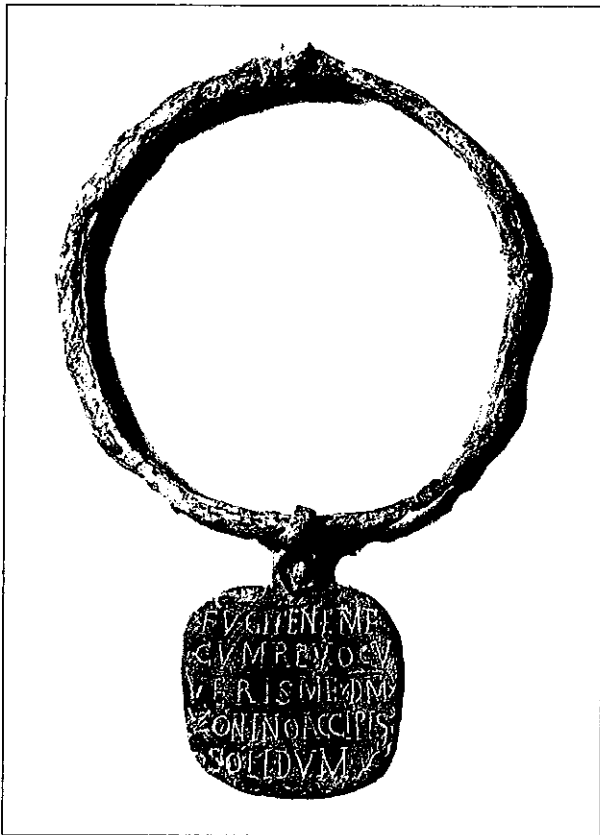
SOME LEGAL ASPECTS OF SLAVERY

Legally, slaves, like animals, were property. As such, they could be bought, sold, given away, or killed at the whim of their owners. Slaveholders exercised complete control over their slaves and could punish misbehavers severely. Runaway slaves were legally guilty of theft; they had stolen themselves.

PUNISHMENTS AND REWARDS

The fear of punishment was an effective way to keep slaves under control. Corporal punishment was common, and slaves were whipped, beaten, branded, and mutilated. Punishment was customarily exacted with other slaves present to terrorize the onlookers into obedience. Although harsh and excessive cruelty towards slaves was socially unacceptable and often criticized by Romans themselves, the practice continued.

Runaway slaves were a constant problem. Upon their capture and return, offenders were often branded or fitted with permanent metal collars identifying them as fugitives. A particularly troublesome slave might be sold to the galleys, the mines, or to a gladiatorial school where their prospects for survival were bleak at best. A slave who made an attempt on the life of a master or participated in an insurrection received the most gruesome punishment - crucifixion. Hanging on a wooden cross brought about a slow and agonizing death by asphyxiation as the lungs of the victim gradually collapsed. If a slaveholder was murdered and the murderer was not found, it was not uncommon for all the slaves in the household to be put to death.



American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive

Fig. 29.

This non-removable slave collar states that the slave wearing it should be returned to his master for a reward.

To encourage cooperative behavior, slaveholders customarily allowed slaves to receive and keep a small amount of money as savings toward the eventual purchase of their freedom (or to buy a slave of their own). Owners could, if they chose, recognize marriage between slaves. These "rewards" might appear to be acts of kindness or generosity on the part of the owner. Actually, they were an effective way to control the behavior of slaves as an alternative to punishment.

MANUMISSION

Manumission was the legal process by which a slave acquired freedom. A freed slave was awarded a felt cap or bonnet, called a *pilleus*, as a symbol of his newly gained freedom.

Many owners freed slaves in their wills. This, however, was not always an act of kindness. It was, indeed, more economical to free older slaves than to maintain them when they were no longer productive. And furthermore, freeing slaves in a will was a mark of status, a visible sign of the wealth of the deceased.

Slaves not freed in wills could be granted their freedom for various reasons. Some were rewarded for their service or talent; others simply grew too

old to be productive. Slaves sometimes purchased their own freedom from their savings, usually at a price agreed upon well in advance. Customarily the cost of freedom was the purchase price of a younger replacement. Slaves were also allowed to purchase the freedom of their family members.

The Romans differed from almost every other slave-owning society in the frequency and regularity with which they freed their slaves. Once formally freed, ex-slaves were eligible for Roman citizenship and the process of assimilation into the class structure of Roman society.

SATURNALIA

The most joyous holiday of the Roman year was the festival of the Saturnalia, a celebration in honor of the god Saturn that began on December 17. Festivities lasted for about seven days and included the exchanging of wax candles and small gifts, such as clay figurines. Merry-making, feasting, and the reversal of the social order marked the Saturnalia. Slaves dined before their masters and discipline was lax. Citizens abandoned the toga in favor of more casual clothing and even wore the *pilleus*, the cap traditionally associated with freed slaves. With good reason the Saturnalia was the holiday most eagerly anticipated by Roman slaves.

Chapter 7 Exercises: *Slavery*

TRUE OR FALSE

Indicate whether each statement is true or false.

1. ____ It was easy to spot slaves on the streets of Rome.
2. ____ Most of what we know about the life of a slave comes from surviving autobiographies of slaves.
3. ____ Most of the slaves in ancient Rome were captives taken in war.
4. ____ Slaves were sold at a fixed rate, regardless of their background or special skills.
5. ____ A red mark on the forehead of a slave sold at auction indicated that he or she was being sold for the first time.
6. ____ Much of the city maintenance work was performed by public slaves.
7. ____ Legally, slaves were no different from animals and could be bought, sold, or given away at the whim of their owners.
8. ____ Whipping and branding were the most serious punishments that a slave could be forced to endure.
9. ____ Roman slaves were not permitted to have or use money.
10. ____ A *pilleus* was a cap and a symbol of freedom awarded to a freed slave.
11. ____ It was a mark of status for a master to free his slaves in his will.
12. ____ Ex-slaves and their descendants were not eligible for Roman citizenship.
13. ____ During the celebration of the Saturnalia, masters tended to relax the disciplinary measures they normally exercised over their slaves.

SHORT ANSWERS

Answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. Briefly explain two ways that slavery in ancient Rome differed from slavery in America or in the British Colonies.
2. What were two of the sources of slaves in ancient Rome?
3. Name some of the special duties and responsibilities of house slaves.

4. Why was it relatively unusual for a slave to be born and bred at home?
5. How did a potential buyer learn about the skills of a slave who was being auctioned for sale in the market?
6. Give examples of high-level and low-level tasks performed by slaves in the areas of agriculture and industry.
7. Why were slaves often forced to witness the brutal treatment of their fellow slaves?
8. How might a fugitive slave who had been recaptured be recognized by others?
9. What were some of the alternatives to punishment that masters used to ensure cooperative behavior among their slaves?
10. Why would a master allow a slave to purchase his or her own freedom?
11. Explain why a master would free slaves in his will.
12. What effect might the ability eventually to become a Roman citizen have had on the slave?